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## HAMLET.

CLAUDE C. H. WILLIAMSON.

EVERY work is either a unity or a nullity; every work is itself and nothing else. Agreed. But the problem for criticism is to discover, in presence of a certain complex of sensations  $x$ , whether there is unity or no, and, if there is, what is its nature. *Othello* has been styled the tragedy of jealousy, *Macbeth* that of fear; *Hamlet* is in process of becoming the tragedy of time wasted. The critics are remorseless; they will not leave each other's interpretations alone. Uncreative themselves, they seek in the play a pivot of manœuvre from which they attempt to recreate the great master in their own image. The lawyers are determined to wrench Shakespeare into the semblance of a jurisconsult; doctors, other than alienists, would like to discern in Hamlet a psycho-physiological study of fatty degeneration of the heart; professors are resolute in finding the playwright in the image of a professor. There is no harm in thinking that Shakespeare is too difficult, and that he ought to have made the play easier for us. But to impugn the psychology of the play, that is unpardonable! Surely, surely, *Hamlet* is recognized as supreme, and its supremacy consists in nothing else but the truth to life of its complex and perplexing characterization.

The study of *Hamlet* continually reveals new details of interest—poetic, philosophic, dramatic. It is the complaint of each new writer that his predecessors have not understood elementary points, or (as Mr. Trench says) first principles. The keynote seems to be the gradual proof of the revelation made by the ghost of Hamlet's father: doubts are thrown in the way, but one by one they are overthrown, and in the end we are convinced that the assertions of the ghost were accurate.

Few critics have even admitted that *Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character has had a

special temptation for that most dangerous type of critic: the critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order, but which through some weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead. These minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization. Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge, who made of Hamlet a Coleridge; and probably neither of these men in writing about Hamlet remembered that his first business was to study a work of art. The kind of criticism that Goethe and Coleridge produced, in writing of Hamlet, is the most misleading kind possible. For they both possessed unquestionable critical insight, and both make their critical aberrations the more plausible by the substitution—of their own Hamlet for Shakespeare's—which their creative gift effects. We should be thankful that Walter Pater did not fix his attention on this play.

*Qua* work of art, the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret; we can only criticise it according to standards, in comparison to other works of art; and for "interpretation" the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not assumed to know. Mr. Robertson points out, very pertinently, how critics have failed in their "interpretation" of *Hamlet* by ignoring what ought to be very obvious: that *Hamlet* is a stratification, that it represents the efforts of a series of men, each making what he could out of the work of his predecessors. The *Hamlet* of Shakespeare will appear to us very differently if, instead of treating the whole action of the play as due to Shakespeare's design, we perceive his *Hamlet* to be superposed upon much cruder material which persists even in the final form.

Among all the warring professors and jarring opinions, Mr. J. M. Robertson intervenes usefully with the proviso, which all the members of the controversial chorus invariably lay down but as infallibly forget in the heat of the argument—namely, that our royal Hamlet was not a Danish prince, but a *dramatis persona*, no more, no less. He makes the

important deduction that to concentrate upon the psychology and the problem of *Hamlet*, as so many superlatively able critics have done, is to use the wrong end of the telescope. It is needful to begin with a study of the genesis of the play. The essential fact is that *Hamlet* is an adaptation of an older play. It may be, possibly, that Hamlet is the victim of an excess of the reflective faculty. You can have it that his mind is a porcelain vase, suitable for mignonette, but not for acorns. You can hold with Voltaire that he was mad out of compliment to his mother, that he was a chameleon, that he was Shakespeare, *tout complet*, a receptacle into which the poet had poured parlous stuff out of his own mental life (hence he was compelled to make him a "slacker" and hence the tragical ending); you can expatiate over a whole volume of catalogue upon the views of Herder and Werder, and the impersonations of Fechter and Sarah Bernhardt. All this might be well, very well indeed. But, after all, and as a matter of fact, the tragic ending was postulated quite simply. The theme or legend or saga upon which it was based, and upon which Shakespeare felt bound to work, was a tragic story of revenge. It was bound to finish as a tragedy—that much at any rate was implied in the unspoken contract with his audience, to which in any wise purview of the matter so much of the peculiar quality of Shakespeare's plays must always be referable. The commentators, good plodding professors, literary persons, conscious of their own consummate fitness for killing a guilty uncle (with a bodyguard) at a moment's notice, are all indignant, asking why Hamlet, having discovered his uncle's crimes, did not make an end of him at once. Their wrath and the refined extenuations of counter-professors may easily extend over many reams and perches of paper.

What is the character of the hero, to construct on the basis of what the dramatist gives us a presentable portrait of a real man. For there is this inner contradiction in Hamlet's personality—that he sensitively shrinks from carrying out the revenge indicated by the Ghost, and yet will do all sorts of bloody deeds on his own account. He spits the

wretched Polonius on his sword-point; he is strongly inclined to stab his uncle in the back while he is engaged in prayer; he sends his college friends quite mercilessly to their death; and is all for a struggle with Laertes on the very grave of Ophelia. Then, principally in his soliloquies, he reveals himself to us as diffident, nervous, procrastinating, "a rogue and peasant slave," according to his own account, playing with the thoughts of suicide and death, and pessimistic as to the existence of truth and love and honour. He suggests the man who is too intellectual to be practical; he thinks too much and does too little. And so we are accustomed to say of him that he is the type of those refined and meditative characters who are, after all, dilettanti, who have fretted away the impulse to action by too keen and vivid an imagination, who argue with themselves and weight alternatives until their very will is paralysed. What prevents him from executing the mission with which he has been entrusted? Material obstacles? No. Psychological scruples? Some of us would answer yes. But not Mr. Robertson. He has a different interpretation. According to him the fault lies with Shakespeare. If we cannot understand Hamlet, it is not because we are stupid, but because the dramatist has blundered.

Charles Lamb, in the well-known *Essay on the Acting of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, speaks of "the silent meditations with which Hamlet's bosom is bursting, reduced to words for the sake of the reader, who else must remain ignorant of what is passing there. These profound sorrows, these light-and-noise-abhorring ruminations, which the tongue scarce dares utter to deaf walls and chambers, how can they be represented by a gesticulating actor, who comes and mouths them out before an audience. . . . And this is the way to represent the shy, negligent, retiring Hamlet. . . . I am not arguing," Charles Lamb adds, "that *Hamlet* should not be acted, but how much *Hamlet* is made another thing by being acted. . . . Those who tell me of the actor Garrick, and his wonders, in this part, speak of his eye and of the magic of his eye, and of his commanding voice.

. . . But what have they to do with Hamlet? What have they to do with intellect? In fact, the things arrived at in theatrical representation are to arrest the spectator's eye upon the form and the gesture, and so to gain a more favourable hearing to what is spoken; it is not what the character is, but how he looks; not what he says, but how he speaks it." You remember the strong words of the *Imitation*, in quietness and confidence: "Mark not who spoke this or that, but mark what is spoken."

The character of Hamlet attracts the reader with the fascination of a mystery that forever invites discovery and forever precludes the possibility of being laid wholly bare. The precipitation of the dramatic method has little to recommend it to many who adore the deliberation of the sermon in discussing these fine traits of character. "Now what took Hamlet into that cemetery to meditate, my brethren?" To some the hero is the incarnation of dilly and dally. To others he is blindly precipitate in the face of obstacles the most overpowering. Some hold that the delay, which he seems so fully to avow, is justified by his desire to do his duty in a more effective and workmanlike fashion. Others applaud his scrupulosity. Dowden's *questionnaire* and compromise is still one of the happiest efforts at reconciling the hundred and fifty varying hues of the spectator's heckle.

It may indeed be called the tragedy of thought, for there is as much reflection as action in it; but the reflection itself is made dramatic, and hurries the breathless audience along, with an interest which knows no pause. Strange it is to notice in this work the indissoluble union of refinement with horrors, of reflection with tumult, of high and delicate poetry with broad, palpable, theatrical effects. The machinery is a machinery of horrors, physical and mental; ghostly apparitions—hideous revelations of incestuous adultery and murder—madness—Polonius killed like a rat while listening behind the arras—grave-diggers casting skulls upon the stage and desecrating the churchyard with their mirth—these and other horrors form the machinery

by which moves the highest, the grandest, and the most philosophic of tragedies.

*Hamlet* comes before us as a work of art, and we must try to judge it as a work of art. But precisely because we delight in it as a work of art, we are deeply interested to discover, if we can, any of the conditions and impulses under which it was created. So long as we remember that we are dealing with a work of art we may safely and honourably venture into historical inquiry, if once we are satisfied that there is a chance of its being fruitful. Even so, we can hardly help being prejudiced against it. Historical fact has an awkward trick of running counter to the artistic fact. There is, for instance, good evidence that *Richard II* was supposed by Shakespeare's contemporaries to have a plain political implication. It was believed to favour the interest of the Essex conspiracy against Elizabeth, who is said to have remarked: "Know ye not that I am Richard II?" Yet a modern reader of the play can only conclude that Elizabeth was morbidly sensitive (as, indeed, she probably was) and Essex's friends, who subsidized the repeated performance of the play, uncommonly simple; for our sympathies go wholly to the deposed king, upon whom Shakespeare lavished his understanding and his art. Whatever interpretations eager politicians may have put upon his play, it is fairly certain that Shakespeare did not intend them. And if this is the case with one of the two plays on which we know that a political construction was placed, there is good reason to look somewhat sceptically upon an attempt to prove a political background for *Hamlet*, a play which, so far as tradition goes, was always held to be quite innocuous. Theorizing about Hamlet has a fatal fascination for some minds, because it is always interesting to make a new study, and very difficult to bring hypotheses to a decisive test.

*Hamlet* is undoubtedly the most subtle and the least obviously dramatic of Shakespeare's great dramas, yet it was one of the most popular. We know that there was an earlier *Hamlet*, and that it also was popular. Shakespeare's

tragedy was not a wholly new construction. It owes a good deal to the 1589 drama by the author of *The Spanish Tragedy*. We know that the motive of this play was "Hamlet, Revenge!" There was a ghost in it who said "Remember," and a play within a play, as there was in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Something of this no-longer-extant play can be divined by a double process, first by means of our knowledge of Kyd, and secondly by reading between the lines of the First Quarto of *Hamlet*, in which it is assumed that a portion of the pre-Shakespearian play must lie imbedded. This point has, however, been warmly and ably contested by James D. Fitzgerald in his *First Quarto of Hamlet: A Literary Fraud*, a brochure printed for the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow in 1910. The earlier *Hamlet* was almost certainly a crude and bloody drama of the primitive Elizabethan kind—chiefly madness, murder and ghost. In so far as the Shakespearian *Hamlet* was a rewriting of this lost original, it would lose, rather than retain, the old popularity. This new Prince of Denmark, the least bloody-minded of men, must have been a sad disappointment to the patrons of the old *Hamlet*. His hesitations, his philosophizing, his utter incapacity to do any of the things a proper tragedy hero should do, and then his pointed gibes at that very "tearing of a passion to tatters" which must have been the chief attraction of the old *Hamlet*, suggest that the popularity of Shakespeare's play was due to quite different causes.

Of its intractability there can be no doubt. In several ways the play is puzzling, and disquieting as is none of the others. Of all the plays it is the longest and is possibly the one on which Shakespeare spent most pains; and yet he has left in it superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even hasty revision should have noticed. The versification is variable. Both workmanship and thought are in an unstable condition. We are surely justified in attributing the play, with that other profoundly interesting play of "intractable" material and astonishing versification, *Measure for Measure*, to a period of crisis, after which follow the

tragic successes which culminate in *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* may be not as "interesting" as *Hamlet*, but it is, with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's most assured artistic success. And probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the "Mona Lisa" of literature.

One can have an artistic blunder, as when a man gets unnecessary detail into his picture, or misses the right atmosphere, or is faulty in the composition of his subject. His "values" may be wrong or his drawing out of focus, or he may miss the right road owing to certain peculiarities of his temperament. Now when a dramatic artist, with his characters and his situations ready to his hand, produces an ambiguous effect by making his personages do the wrong thing or manifest traits and characteristics which are inconsistent and incongruous, then we say that he has mistaken his task, that he has not clearly marked out his *dramatis personæ* and insufficiently analyzed them—or if we like to use strong terms we say that he has blundered. Now, what is it that Shakespeare is supposed to have done in *Hamlet*? He has—as usual—adopted a good deal of existing material, and especially made use of an old piece, containing a ghost, a mock-madness, and a play within a play. He has taken over bodily a good deal of antique saga-like material, including a vigorous hero who does valiant deeds, as any hero of a saga ought to do. But then, in order to make his piece interesting to an Elizabethan audience, he has rewritten the character of his hero, by means of soliloquies and occasional utterances, so that there emerges from his hands a Hamlet who is moody, pessimistic, self-analytical, incapable of energetic action—and knowing that he is incapable—a prey to suicidal thoughts, and continually postponing his revenge. It is this transformation of a character which causes all the difficulty, because Shakespeare has retained the barbaric action of an old plot—murders behind the arras and the rest of it—and attributed such action to a hero who is no longer barbaric, but a super-subtle Elizabethan.

Hamlet is never mad: the poet's treatment is so clear on this point that I can only express astonishment that any different view should have crept into criticism. At the beginning of the story, even before the excitement of the Ghost Scene, the hero appears as a man of bitter irony, veiling a tone of feeling with an opposite tone of expression.

*Horatio.* My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

*Hamlet.* I pray thee, do not mock me, fellow-student;  
I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

*Horatio.* Indeed, my lord, it follow'd close upon.

*Hamlet.* Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral baked-meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.<sup>1</sup>

When suddenly has come the shock of a revelation—a revelation of horror taking the dubious form of a communication from the supernatural world—it is small wonder that a man of this temperament should be driven for a moment to hysterical irony.

O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!  
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.<sup>2</sup>

In this mood Hamlet is rejoined by his comrades;<sup>3</sup> when he sees the astonishment on their faces at his own wild irony, his quick mind catches the thought of using this hysterical mockery as a stalking-horse behind which he may watch the dreadful situation until he can see how to act. He not only so resolves, but he takes his comrades into his confidence. For to define true madness what is it but to be nothing else but mad?

Dr. Bucknill on Hamlet's "madness" reads: "Hamlet is morbidly melancholiac." "He is a reasoning melancholiac." "Yet, like the melancholiacs described by Burton, he is 'of profound judgment in some things, excellent apprehension, judicious, wise, and witty; for, melancholy advanceeth men's conceit more than any humour whatever.'

<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet* I, ii, 176.

<sup>2</sup> I, v, 106.

<sup>3</sup> I, v, from III.

He is in a state," adds the doctor, "which thousands pass through without becoming truly insane, but which in hundreds does pass into actual madness." Burton, further: "Humorous they (melancholias) are, beyond measure, sometimes profusely laughing, extraordinary merry, and then again weeping without a cause; groaning, sighing, pensive, sad, almost distracted, restless in their thoughts and actions, continually meditating."

Perhaps one might leave the matter there. Highly-strung, nervous, well-bred in all senses, sensitive, irritable, wildly passionate, yet loving and longing; distraught, then; still, keeping all his varied powers; though unhappy beyond measure, and not knowing what to do, maddened with it all. If that is mad, so was Hamlet; the heart-broken, the naturally open-hearted, trustful, and generous; a man made to be loved and honoured.

Some have represented Hamlet as an incredibly depressed individual, entirely bereft of vitality and initiative, and expressing himself not, as one might have hoped, in the tones of everyday conversation, but in an affected, drawling singsong, which eventually degenerated into a perpetual and lachrymose miaowing. The great advantage of *Hamlet*, from the actor's point of view, lies in its extreme length, which gives him every excuse for suppressing anything contradictory to his own conception of the play. If you choose to regard Hamlet as a strong silent man of action, you can cut out all the more talkative and undecided parts of the play and yet have enough left to keep you going (with incidental music and tableaux) for at least three and a half hours.

This madness of Hamlet then, assumed for a specific purpose in the movement of the story, serves also as relief: the hysterical incoherence of the supposed madman is used to mock king and courtier, and to mock even Ophelia herself, whom in the general hollowness of all appearances Hamlet has come to doubt. With this is combined, as in *Lear*, another form of relief, the real madness of Ophelia, so piteous in its incoherences.

The “madness” of Hamlet lay to Shakespeare’s hand; in the earlier play a simple ruse, and to the end, we may presume, understood as a ruse by the audience. For Shakespeare it is less than madness and more than feigned. The levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief. In the character Hamlet it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art. The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a study to pathologists. It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feeling to fit the business world; the artist keeps it alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions. The Hamlet of Laforgue is an adolescent; the Hamlet of Shakespeare is not, he has not that explanation and excuse. We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know.

It must be remembered that the essential idea of relief in tragedy is not necessarily the mingling of comic with serious; any other variation of emotional tone may serve, if it is used to break the sustained sense of movement towards a tragic climax. In the fifth act we have the regular agency of relief, the clown, varied into the form of grave-diggers, and professional jesting is turned upon the most gruesome of topics. If this analysis be correct, we seem in the play *Hamlet* to have an underplot of relief matter, appearing successively in five varied forms; the supernatural awe of the Ghost Scenes, the hysterical mockery of Hamlet, the histrionic passion of the players, the pathetic madness of Ophelia, and the weird humour of the grave-diggers.

The grounds of Hamlet’s failure are not immediately obvious. Mr. Robertson is undoubtedly correct in concluding

that the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother: (*Hamlet's*) "tone is that of one who has suffered tortures on the score of his mother's degradation.

. . . The guilt of a mother is an almost intolerable motive for drama, but it had to be maintained and emphasized to supply a psychological solution, or rather a hint of one." This, however, is by no means the whole story. It is not merely the "guilt of a mother" that cannot be handled as Shakespeare handled the suspicion of Othello, the infatuation of Antony, or the pride of Coriolanus. The subject might conceivably have expanded into a tragedy like these, intelligible, self-complete, in the sunlight. *Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. And when we search for this feeling, we find it, as in the sonnets, very difficult to localize. We find Shakespeare's *Hamlet* not in the action, not in any quotations that we might select, so much as in an unmistakable tone which is unmistakably not in the earlier play. One thing we do know—that Shakespeare had obtained a thorough comprehension of Hamlet's malady.

Truly, variety without end seems near many a life less extraordinary than Hamlet's. And it is absurdly unnecessary to declare that there are in the play two Hamlets; one early and barbarous; one later and a philosopher. How unlike we all are to our other selves: happy, and then morose because of greater selfishness than Hamlet's; elated, and then all the more depressed; singing, like Sir Hugh Evans, because we are in a funk, and, mercy on us! have a great disposition to cry; disgusted with life, because we are disgusted with some human beings; yet no misanthropes, it may be, at heart. Things in their actual, phenomenal aspect flit before Hamlet as transitory, accidental and unreal.

If you examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumula-

tion of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic "inevitability" lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him. And it must be noticed that the very nature of the *données* of the problem precludes objective equivalence. To have heightened the criminality of Gertrude would have been to provide the formula for a totally different emotion in Hamlet; it is just *because* her character is so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing.

We are all interested in psychological theories nowadays, and we talk glibly of "complexes" and the analyses of Freud. There is a part of our mind which we call the conscious mind, and there is another and more mysterious part which we call the unconscious mind, or, to give it its more honourific title, the subliminal consciousness. The first is easy enough to understand. It deals with the sphere of intelligence and thought. The other is a more mysterious region, for the unconscious mind plays a great part in all our lives and often baffles us by producing results exactly the contrary to what we anticipated. M. Coué refers to its effect on the unconscious mind when he bids us repeat his

well-known formula. For in his theory the mainspring of action is derived, not from reason or from the will, but from the dim realm of emotion and feeling which exists behind, as it were, all our open life.

Shakespeare's business was not to explain Hamlet's irresolution, not even necessarily to understand it, but merely to make us accept it as real. The world has been more interested in this than in any other play, and in Hamlet than in any other figure of drama for three centuries; and it is in consequence of the strength and universality of that interest that the desire to find a psychological explanation arises. To put the question is natural and legitimate; to answer it may even be useful, in so far as it removes an obstacle to the fullness of our æsthetic experience of the play. But we must not give it any higher value than that.

When Hamlet was implored by his father's ghost to avenge his murder, and in particular to put an end to the incestuous marriage between his mother and the murderer, his conscious resolve, made with all the force of his will, was to obey his father.<sup>4</sup> But the shock which he suffered on hearing of the murder and on realising the full horror of his mother's action made, as it were, a wound in his mind, which hurt whenever he thought of his uncle or of his mother's connection with that uncle.

<sup>4</sup> Sir J. G. Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, part 1. "The Magic Art," vol. 11, pages 280, et seq., 1917 edition. He states:

It would seem that among some Aryan peoples, at a certain stage of their social evolution, it has been customary to regard women and not men as the channels in which royal blood flows, and to bestow the kingdom in each successive generation on a man of another family, and often of another country, who marries one of the princesses and reigns over his wife's people. . . . Where usages and ideas of this sort prevail, it is obvious that the kingship is merely an appanage of marriage with a woman of the blood royal. . . . Wherever a custom of this sort is observed a man may clearly acquire the kingdom just as well by marrying the widow as the daughter of his predecessor. This is what Ægisthus did at Mycenæ, and what Hamlet's uncle Feng and Hamlet's successor, Wiglet, did in Denmark; all three slew their predecessors, married their widows, and then sat peacefully on the throne. The tame submission of the people to their rule would be intelligible, if they regarded the assassins, in spite of their crime, as the lawful occupants of the throne by reason of their marriage with the widowed queens.

The pain was apparently so sharp that unconsciously he flinched from it, and seized every pretext to forget it. He would will to remember it as he willed to take vengeance. But here the law of "reversed action" worked within him. The more he tried to force himself into action, the more his unconscious self invented pretexts of delay. Here is the Hamlet case presented to us exactly as though it were one of the ordinary experiments of M. Coué. Here is the conscious intelligence frustrated by the unconscious self—a phenomenon which occurs over and over again in our experience. Hamlet's unconscious was always preventing him from doing what his conscious self designed. Shakespeare was not a psychologist in the modern sense, but his intuitive knowledge of human character made him draw a figure in which we can discern many modern analogies. Hamlet has, indeed, had a picturesque career; and the cause of his delay in killing the King has been canvassed for 200 years, since a man called Hanmer started the inquiry in 1736. It has, however, been left for a modern Georgian critic to convert the "moody Dane" into a Freudian hero. To this principle Mr. Clutton-Brock is faithful in forming his own explanation. Some find the clue to the secret of Hamlet's conduct in the change in his manner after he has seen his father's ghost for the first time. In his mental disturbance he is at the mercy of the chance suggestions of words. It is upon the nature of that disturbance of mind that the whole of the action depends. He is to be regarded not as a man whose reason has been shaken, but as one who has been so profoundly hurt that he cannot endure to look at what is in his mind. It is his unconscious shrinking from the pain of that wound which holds him back from action and makes him snatch at every excuse for delay, even though his conscious mind rages at his own indecision.

Hamlet is an enigmatical character; he represents a problem which is very hard to solve. In this case the explanation may be that he is not actual but ideal, a coinage of Shakespeare's brain, invented by the dramatist and containing contradictions and inconsistencies, directly we confront

him with human flesh and blood. But, on the other hand, there is the intense sympathy he creates from his very first entrance on the stage; we seem to understand him even in his wildest flights; our heart goes out to him, to use the common phrase. Moreover, it is not otherwise than significant that no actor fails in Hamlet. At all events, that is the current doctrine of the theatre, and the mere fact that such a belief prevails on the boards would apparently show that Hamlet is by no means an impossible, but a very personable hero. He may be ideal, but he is not unreal. You understand him, perhaps, better on the stage than in your study. Our scepticism is increased when we discover that one of the reasons for suspecting a political intention in *Hamlet* is that there are profound inconsistencies in the play, which cannot be otherwise explained. Here the naïvety of Miss Winstanley is very apparent; from the fact that critics have taken irreconcilable views of the play she concludes that the elements of the play itself are irreconcilable. It is true that a few critics have pronounced *Hamlet* an artistic failure, lacking in real dramatic unity, but they have been few, and they have not been the best. Neither Coleridge nor Goethe found any insuperable difficulties in the play; and, even though we may think they set Shakespeare on an inaccessible pinnacle, they carry more weight than all the rest of the critics put together; for they had the advantage of being great poets. The simple explanation of the disagreement of the critics is that *Hamlet* is a masterpiece; and a masterpiece is, almost by definition, a work from which very different men can derive a satisfaction which is complete and peculiar to themselves.

CLAUDE C. H. WILLIAMSON.

LONDON.